

## DANCE IN THE SAN FRANCISCO BAY AREA: A NEEDS ASSESSMENT

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: SIGNIFICANT FINDINGS AND OBSERVATIONS

Dance in the San Francisco Bay Area: A Needs Assessment represents a yearlong study of the Bay Area dance community, with specific attention to the needs of dance artists and companies. Details of specific issues and profiles of the community are included in the full version of the report. Three particular observations need to be brought forward, as they provide the most helpful context in which to interpret data on singular or narrowly focused issues.

Small- and mid-size companies are under severe economic stress. The most significant findings reveal the current financial and environmental challenges facing small- to mid-scale companies and artists. Their circumstances indicate a general trend, but with no single explanation or simple solution. Often, they regard their difficulties of being under-institutionalized and undercapitalized as overwhelming. The conditions under which many dance artists create and perform are marked by an intricate cross-hatching of obstacles, claiming sacrifices from the artists and their supporters. As the reader considers the statistics and evidence of the community's needs elaborated in Part 3, "Topics and Issues of Concern," we hope that the specific problems will be interpreted in light of the complete picture.

The ethnic dance communities of the Bay Area are undervalued. Rather than a regional anomaly or fringe element, the ethnic dance communities are an integral part of Bay Area dance. They are serious, dedicated, professional, experienced, and extensive. And their forms and contributions to the cultural milieu may be underestimated by audiences, funders, and media of all kinds. The evidence demonstrates that the holistic acceptance of the ethnic dance communities into the Bay Area is due.

Many characteristics of the Bay Area dance community correspond to national trends. In terms of the genres represented among Bay Area dance--their quantity and their dynamics--the region has some unique characteristics. But, as a final noteworthy observation, in terms of the challenges facing the whole dance community, its profile faithfully follows the trends observed nationwide (1). The sense of isolation articulated by many artists, therefore, may come not from regional boundaries but may be related to the isolation caused from being overburdened, a situation true of organizations across the nation. Small- to mid-size dance groups feel the hardships of an overtaxed infrastructure and unstable incomes, in the Bay Area and nationwide. The ladder upward--whether toward stability, greater size, more opportunities or funding--needs secure rungs in the Bay Area and nationwide. Touring opportunities have also been observed to be shrinking everywhere. Nonetheless, there is a national influx of young energy into dance communities that seems to be a trend, especially as fueled by graduates of college dance departments. There is a parallel trend of increasing energy and visibility among ethnic, culturally specific, and national dance forms, even within communities less richly endowed with these forms than the Bay Area. The means to bring together the creative resources and achievements of these newcomers and seasoned professionals is a necessary goal of our future.

## SYNOPSIS OF TOPICS OF CONCERN

In the course of the accretion of interview and statistical evidence, the study identified a number of topics where new or revamped initiatives could mitigate problems or respond to needs faced by many professional choreographers and companies.

**Infrastructure.** The stress upon the artistic leaders of small- and mid-size dance groups is significant. Economic and time pressures conspire to limit the artistic activity and maturation of many of these ensembles. New choreographers and small companies bubble up regularly, showing the region's artistic energy; however, the lack of financial and personnel support for many essential activities in keeping dance ensembles together creates a volatile or unstable situation for the majority of respondents. Suggestions for strengthening infrastructures included funding for general operations, shared and centralized information and support services, among others.

**Performance Opportunities.** As in other cities, the dilemma faced by most artists in the Bay Area is getting their work seen, but without incurring severe financial liabilities. The second most common need listed on the survey was "access to performance spaces." In varying degrees, this issue confronts young independents all the way up to the largest, established companies. The most frequently described spaces listed as needs were (1) a mid-size space of 200-400 seats, and (2) multi-functional spaces that can accommodate the process of dance-making-research, development, and showing of works-in-progress, rather than just performances in their final form. In what may be a link to the need or preference for shared administrative services and overhead, the desire for additional festival series or showcases was also noted.

**Space.** Information about and access to space, whether for teaching, rehearsals, or performances, emerged as a priority. As San Francisco has experienced a critical space crunch in the last three years, this priority is not surprising; however, different regions within the Bay Area ranked their need for "information about space" and "access to space" somewhat differently. Recurring in the comments was the specific need for a mid-size performance space (200-400 seats). In January 2002, real estate prices in downtown San Francisco were reported as having returned to 1999 levels because of the decline of the dot-com industry. Whether this development will ease the space crunch in a measurable way has yet to be seen.

**Services.** The need for a service provider for the Bay Area dance community emerged as a recurring concern. In addition to being a central place for information on funding, space, contact lists, calendars of events and classes, and the like, a case was made that a hub for dance would encourage more networking and connection among the dance community. Smaller groups and independent choreographers endorsed structures for shared support services, so that the time, cost, and space required for administrative and other tasks could be more efficiently shouldered.

**Funding.** The Bay Area has a spectrum of municipal and foundation support for dance, but results of the study suggest that two critical areas in particular could be shored up. First, the paucity of support for infrastructure puts economic and planning burdens on small- and mid-size companies that have fewer funding options and scarce administrative resources. Second, there seems to be an absence of funding programs to smooth the path as smaller groups move from entry-level support into competition in the mid-size funding

pool. A number of smaller concerns (such as unpredictability of funding, short funding cycles, and shifts of funding priorities) emerged; these worries seem linked to the difficulty of long-range financial planning when grants or other income is not assured.

Print Media. Alternative and print media documentation of all dance activity needs to be more encompassing, timely and informed. Reviews, or other forms of print recognition of dance concerts, were specifically identified as important to audience-building and fund-raising.

Genre-Related Concerns. The study revealed that the size and experience of the ethnic dance community in the Bay Area was under-recognized, and thus undervalued. In connection with this primary difficulty, the ethnic dance community voiced specific concerns: eligibility problems with some grant programs, performance opportunities for ethnic forms, the need for connection among ethnic-based dancers and companies, and absence from traditional print media.

Teaching and Arts Education. Although teaching and arts education were not primary focal points or concerns of this study, the study uncovered significant ongoing involvement of the professional dance community with teaching in many venues and with all age groups. Teaching provided some professional and financial stability, but at the same time often jeopardized the amount of time and energy available for creative art-making. Additional study of the relationship of teaching to the professional dance community is warranted.

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A significant value of this project has been in giving voice and face to the composition and identity of the smaller, less visible dance companies in the Bay Area. These companies emerge clearly as an integral part of the dance landscape. The data show they are not less important or less successful, in the context of their aesthetic goals and leadership, though they may not approximate corporate or media-driven models of success. This study suggests that strategies to sustain the smaller or less "mainstream" companies may be an essential part of the equation yielding a more secure and sustainable health for all Bay Area dance. We hope that policy makers who are motivated by this report to undertake particular projects or studies will continue to make the inclusion of these voices integral to their process.

(1) For additional data on national trends, see "Dancing with Dollars in the Millennium: A Ten-Year Summary of Trends," co-published by Dance/USA and Dance Magazine as a supplement to Dance Magazine, April 2001.

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